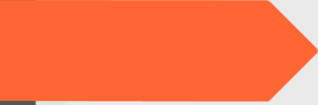


COUTTS BORDER BLOCKADE

Front Line Response

S/Sgt John Spaans

RCMP – Central Alberta District



Disclaimer

- ▶ The following presentation will discuss, in general terms, the law enforcement frontline response to the Coutts Border Blockade incident.
- ▶ The criminal investigation into the event is complex and ongoing.
- ▶ The Federal Government, including the RCMP, are subject to civil action across the country relating to protest response.
- ▶ Recordings and copies of the presentation are not permitted



Introduction

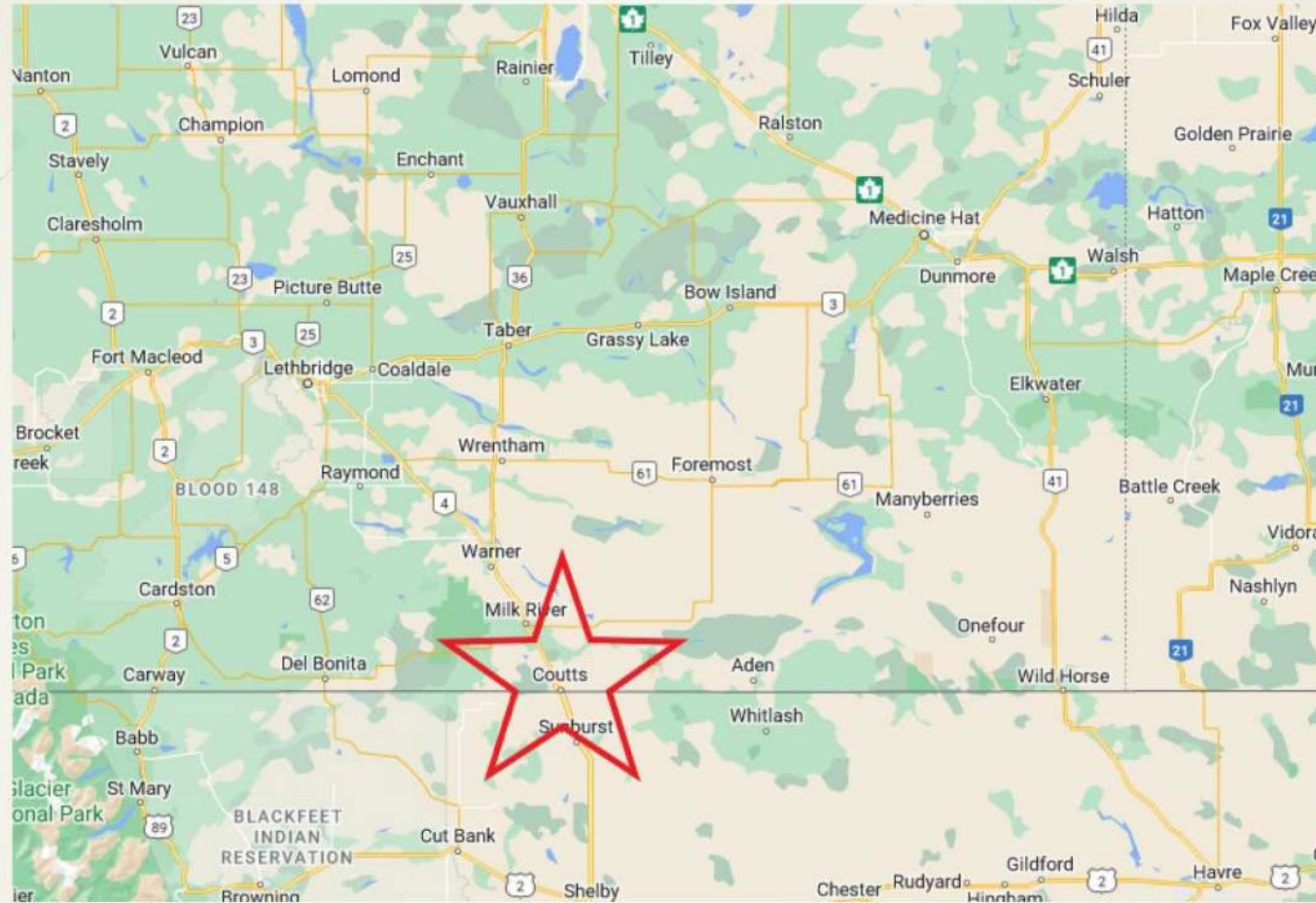
- S/Sgt John Spaans
- 17 years of experience with the RCMP
- Current posted to Central Alberta District as a District Advisory NCO
- Experience with major events and mass deployments
 - Whistle Stop Café – Mirror, AB – 2021
 - Slave Lake Wildfires / Floods – Slave Lake, AB – 2018
 - Fort McMurray Wildfire – Fort McMurray, AB – 2016
 - Slave Lake Wildfire – Slave Lake, AB - 2010

Background

What was the Coutts Blockade?



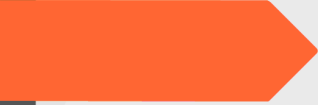
Photo source: jurist.org



Coutts is a small village in southern Alberta situated along the United States – Canada border.

The port of entry is one of the busiest along the international border.

The port connects Canada and the United States and provides direct access to Mexico (CANAMEX Corridor).



Protests

- ▶ On January 28, 2022 protesters blockaded the highway north of the Coutts-Sweet Grass Border Crossing.
- ▶ Protesters were displaying their opposition to government imposed mandates and restrictions designed to curb the spread of COVID-19.
- ▶ One such mandate involved mandatory vaccinations for cross border commercial traffic.



Photo source: CochraneNow



Protesters used commercial vehicles, heavy equipment and farm implements to block the highway in the north and southbound lanes.

This prevented access to the US Border and prevented Canada-bound traffic from being able to move north of the port.



Initial Challenges

The establishment of the blockade was sudden.

Dozens of commercial and private vehicles, not involved in the protests, were stuck amongst the blockage participants.

Early efforts were made by police to provide support and arrange for their safe exit.

By the third day of the blockade, all non-involved vehicles had been removed and those on-site were considered participants or supporters.



Photo source: Global News



Photo source: BBC

February 1, 2022 initial stages of enforcement action took place.

Protesters and supporters reacted by increasing vehicle numbers.

This resulted in the establishment of two distinct protest sites; the border and Checkpoint 10 (CP10)



Border Blockade



Photo source: Globe and Mail



Photo source: Global News

CP10



Photo source: windobi.com



Photo source: jurist.org

Response

- The RCMP established an incident command structure using a Gold, Silver, Bronze hierarchy.
- Officers from across the province were deployed to assist with several functions



Photo source: Global News

GOLD

Incident
Commander

SILVER

Site Commander

BRONZE

Frontline Policing

Investigation

Strategic
Communications

Special Tactical
Operations

Logistics

Border Security

Partner Agencies

Traffic Services



This Gold-Silver-Bronze command structure is a system which clarifies reporting lines and accountability.

The system is based on roles rather than rank.

This systems is flexible and works in conjunction with the Incident Command System (ICS) or other incident command systems known throughout the country.



Photo source: reddit



Photo source: Global News



GOLD

- The Gold commander is a senior officer responsible for the operation.
- Provides strategic direction
- Establishes the overall goals and objectives of the operation



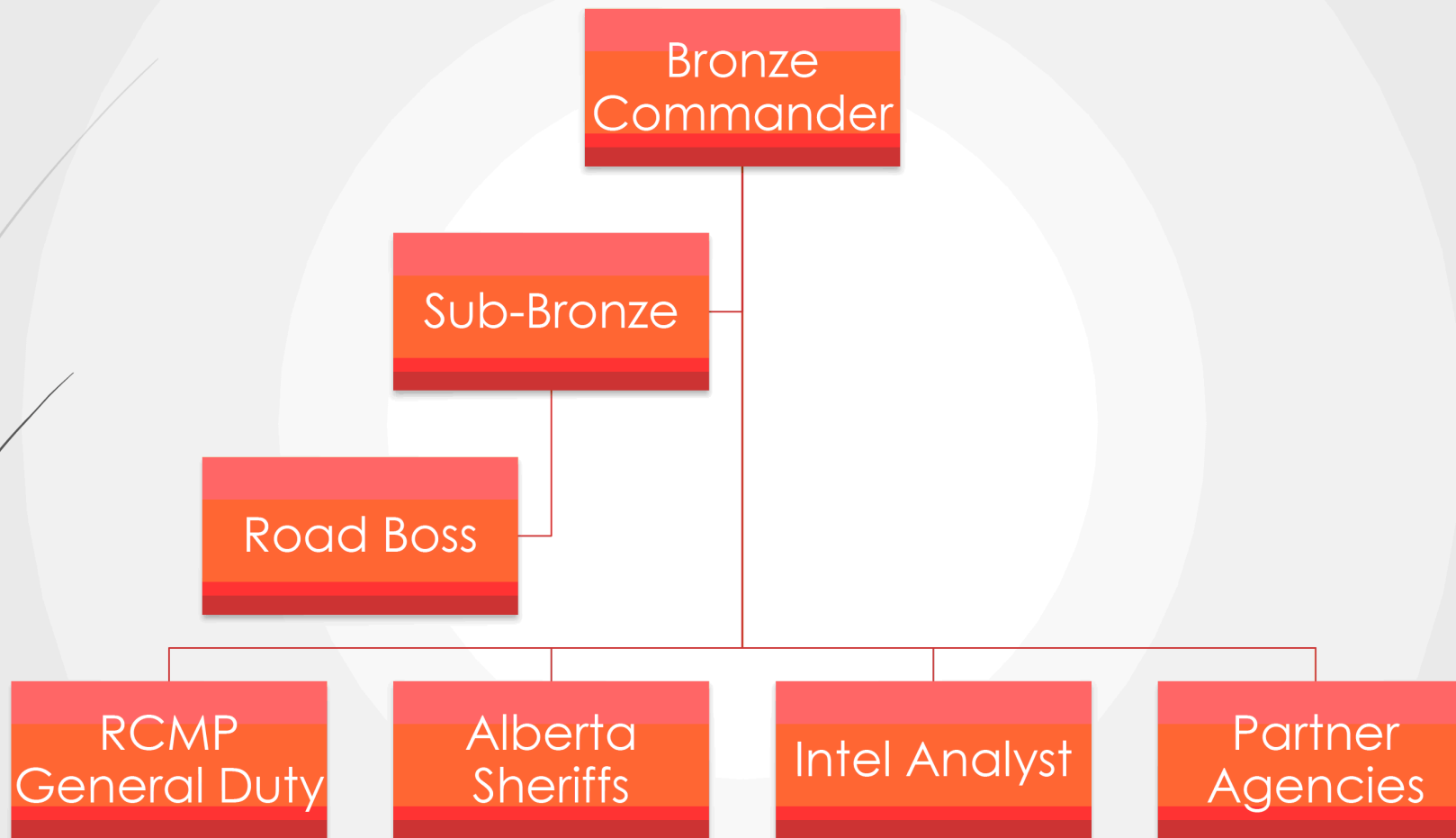
SILVER

- ▶ Develops the operational plan to achieve the goals established by the gold commander
- ▶ Works with the gold commander to ensure sufficient resources are in place to manage the event.



BRONZE

- Is the leader of a team.
- Responsible for developing and implementing tactical plans based on the goals established by the Silver and Gold Commanders.
- In an operation the size of the Coutts Border Protest, there were several Bronze commanders responsible for various objectives and goals.
- Within the Frontline Policing Bronze team, a sub-structure was established.





Structure

- ▶ The development of a sub-structure was essential to the efficient use of frontline police resources.
- ▶ As the Bronze Commander I identified priorities and objectives that were required to meet the overall goals of the operation.
- ▶ The Sub-Bronze commander was my second in command and was responsible for the implementation of the daily plans.
- ▶ Road Bosses were key to the operation. These were trusted NCOs who were the eyes and ears on the ground.
- ▶ Two road bosses were assigned; one for each protest site.

Resources

- ▶ The frontline bronze team was resource heavy.
- ▶ At it's peak, ~80 frontline resources were used each day to provide 24 hours coverage to the site.
- ▶ Frontline resources needed to be flexible and ready to change objectives and tasks.

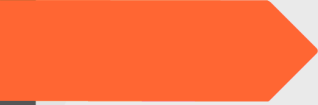


Photo source: CBC



Frontline Police Objectives

- ▶ As the protest grew, objectives changed.
- ▶ Often objectives would change throughout the day.
- ▶ Primary Responsibilities / Functions:
 1. Police and Public Safety
 2. Site Security
 3. Maintenance of ingress and egress routes
 4. Screening vehicles
 5. Interacting with the protesters
 6. Enforcement



Risk Assessments

How Were Resources Deployed

- Regular risk assessments were conducted throughout the event.
- These assessments were used to deployed resources.
- Proper risk assessments afforded the ability to determine short term and long term needs.
- What forms a risk assessment?
 1. SITUATION
 2. MISSION
 3. EXECUTION
 4. ADMINISTRATION
 5. COMMAND

Situation

- ▶ Throughout the event, several times per day, road bosses and the sub-bronze would report on the current situation
- ▶ This involved examining several points:
 - ▶ Vehicle numbers
 - ▶ Vehicle types
 - ▶ Mobility of the vehicles involved in the event
 - ▶ Current protest locations
 - ▶ Weather
 - ▶ What are the protesters saying?



Photo source: Reach FM

Mission

- What needs to be accomplished during this operational phase?
- Considering the situation, what are the priorities?
 - Are more resources required at CP10?
 - Are frontline officers required for enforcement activities?
 - Are frontline resources needed to patrol other ports of entry?
 - Are frontline resources needed to guard towed vehicles?



Photo source: YouTube

Execution

- How will we execute the current mission?
- The function of the sub-bronze and road bosses was to put plans into practice.
- This involved scaling down/up checkpoints
- Adjusting the shift coverage
- Building new teams



Photo source: duchertidao.com



Administration

- ▶ Identifying the required resources and equipment to execute the missions
 - ▶ Short term – What do we need in the next 12 hours
 - ▶ Long term – What do we need three days to a week from now
- ▶ One of the most challenging aspects of the operation
 - ▶ Difficult to gauge based on the constant evolution of the event.
- ▶ A plan was devised to have up to 80 front line resources available 24 hours per day.
 - ▶ This would involved leveraging relationships with partner agencies.

Command and Communication

- Who is in control?
- With the ever changing situation and influx of police resources, the command team made to clear who was running frontline operations
- Goals were communicated at the beginning of shifts and as tasks arose.



Photo source: duchertidao.com

Competing Demands

- ▶ By the second week of the operation, CP10 became the primary collection point for protesters and supporters
 - ▶ At any given time there were approximately 200 vehicles and pieces of equipment present at CP10.
 - ▶ Most established camps within the median and traffic was obstructed in both directions.



- 
- Approximately half of the frontline RCMP resources were dedicated to maintaining the CP10 blockade and preventing any further protest vehicles from accessing the border protest site.
 - Along with maintaining CP10, RCMP frontline resources covered 12 additional checkpoints and conducted enhanced enforcement on area highway.
 - In order to address increasing demand and new objectives arising from risk assessments, leveraging relationships with partner agencies was essential.

Frontline Tasks

Check Point Support

24 hour coverage of the primary protest sites along with surrounding rural roads.



Photo source: Rebel News

Evidence Gathering

Supporting the investigative team with evidence collation and observation.



Photo source: Narcity



Frontline Tasks cont'd

Community Engagement

- Talking with and listening to the protesters, supporters and residents of Coutts.



Photo source: Rdnewsnow.com

Enforcement

- Presence on area highways to ensure the safety and security of the traveling public.



Photo source: Lethbridge Herald

Partners





Alberta Sheriffs



Commercial Vehicle Enforcement



Lethbridge Police Service



Fish and Wildlife



CP Police

How were partners used?

- ▶ Partner agencies were used to supplement existing resources
- ▶ Focussed on areas of expertise
 - ▶ Traffic Sheriffs assigned to highway enforcement
 - ▶ Prisoner Transport Sheriffs helped with the prisoner vans.
- ▶ Important to be mindful of legal authorities, training and comfort of the partner agency members



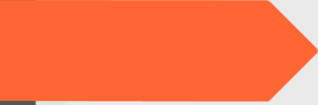
Photo source: reddit

Authorities / Abilities

- ▶ Law enforcement utilized several existing authorities including:
 - ▶ Criminal Code
 - ▶ Traffic Safety Act
 - ▶ Use of the Highway and Rules of the Road Regulations
 - ▶ Critical Infrastructure Defence Act
- ▶ Were partner agencies authorized to enforce these acts?
- ▶ Training and ability were key considerations.
- ▶ Mitigated the risk by deploying partner agency members to work along side RCMP at the protest sites



Photo source: Global News



Benefits

- Leveraging relationships afforded frontline operations the ability to broaden the actives
- Example 1: Assigning the Lethbridge Police Service to highway enforcement activities freed up RCMP members to maintain coverage at all checkpoints while still meeting arising needs.
- Example 2: The Alberta Sheriffs were assigned to patrol other highways leading to ports of entry which allowed for the consolidation of RCMP resources at the primary site.
- Example 3: The Alberta Sheriffs provided two command post trailers which gave the members at CP10 a location to rest and get out of the elements.

Success

- ▶ On February 15 the blockade ended.
- ▶ The ending to the blockade was due in large part to the patience displayed by law enforcement.
- ▶ A measured approach, supported by the efficient deployment of frontline resources, afforded the ability to managed the prolonged event.



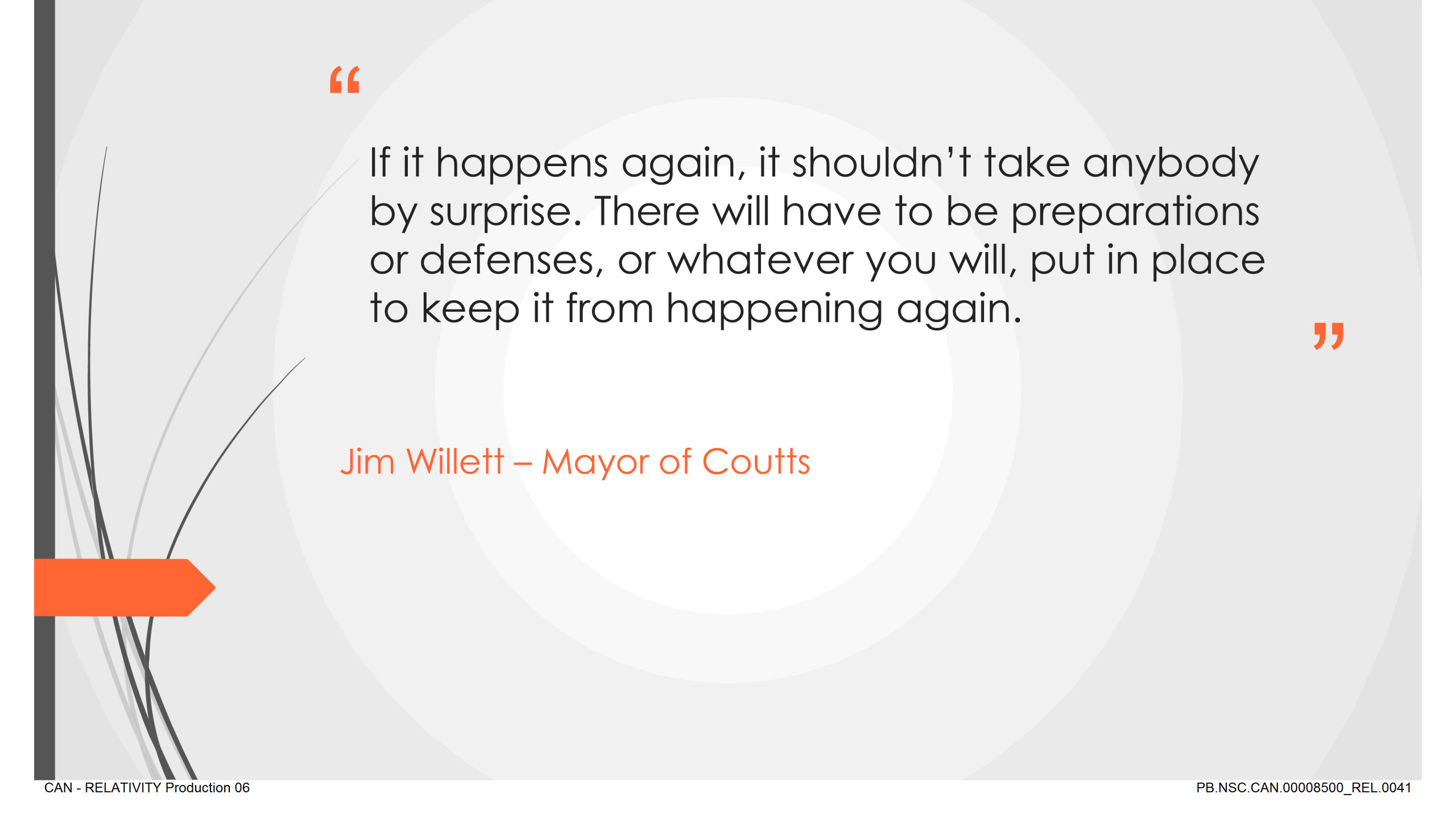
Photo source: Pique Newsmagazine

Lessons Learned

- ▶ Early establishment of a command hierarchy
- ▶ Ongoing risk assessment
 - ▶ Identify short term and long term objectives
- ▶ Determine staffing needs based on objectives, not the other way around
- ▶ Engage partner agencies at the outset and give them a seat at the table.



Photo source: Prince George Citizen

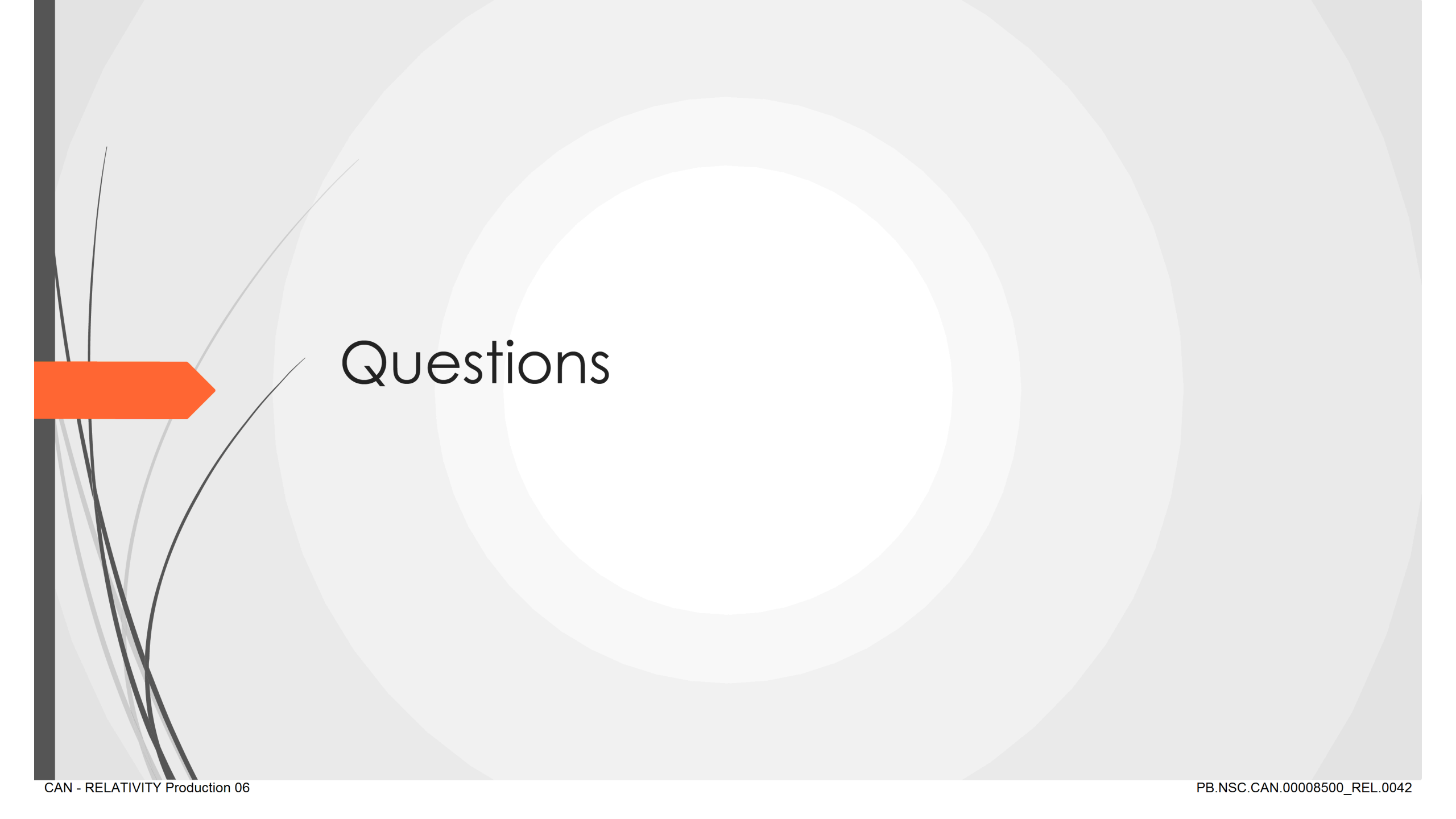


“

If it happens again, it shouldn't take anybody by surprise. There will have to be preparations or defenses, or whatever you will, put in place to keep it from happening again.

”

Jim Willett – Mayor of Coutts



Questions